



Tips on Writing News and Feature Articles

Most local papers, as well as local or state trade publications, are often looking for good articles written by a guest contributor. These stories can be news-oriented or feature-oriented in style and are often included in special editions or, in some cases, on a regular basis. Just as your time is precious as a teacher, time is limited for media and marketing professionals. By writing an article appropriate for their publication, you are providing a welcomed service while capitalizing on an opportunity to get your message out to an influential audience.

Identifying Article Opportunities

Unlike a press release, writing and submitting news or feature articles is something you'll be *asked* to do or something you'll *volunteer* to do with the consent of the publication. Press releases put you in a position of *supplying* news to as many news outlets as you deem appropriate. As the author of a news or feature article, you are now *reporting* news or *telling* a story for a specific publication and audience.

The best way to determine if there is an opportunity for you to write news or feature articles is to be familiar with media outlets most acceptable to outside contributors. These may include your local paper, a state education or agriculture newsletter, state agriculture trade publications, etc. Check to see if your local paper is interested in receiving articles from you about chapter activities or topics related to students' SAEs and ag education. They may prefer a press release or to cover the story themselves, but it doesn't hurt to offer. If you have a state agriculture teachers newsletter or state agriculture publications, ask if they would be interested in news items or a guest column by you on an agreed upon subject. Your state agriculture publication(s) may even have a section already dedicated to FFA that is in need of good stories.

Writing News and Feature Articles

When writing news and feature articles, you can think of "news as news" and a feature as "news with personality." In the case of a news article, you may be asked to write a concise news brief about a state winning CDE team, proficiency award winner or fundraising event. With feature stories news components are important, but you'll also have more freedom to personalize the story and give it a voice. An example would be a story about the value of SAEs told from the perspective of a student who started out with a minimal interest in agriculture but recently achieved the state FFA degree. Or a story on a chapter greenhouse that has supplied Christmas poinsettias to the sick and elderly during the holidays as a combined SAE/Community service project with quotes from students, as well as beneficiaries.

Regardless if it is news or feature material, you will still need to answer the questions: Who?, What?, When?, Where?, Why? and How? This may require you to conduct interviews or Internet research to gather information needed to write an interesting and factual article. The more information you have up front, the

easier it will be to write your story. Since you are writing the article for a specific publication, there are a few questions you should ask your contact at the publication before you begin.

- How long should the article be? (*approximate number of words or pages*)
- What is the deadline to have the article completed and to the publication?
- Who do I send the article to when completed? What is their contact information? (*They will probably want you to e-mail the article.*)
- In what format do you want the article? (*Most likely, it will be Word.*) Is there a specific font or publication guidelines you'd like me to use?
- Do you want a photograph to accompany the article? If digital, in what resolution? (*If you send a photo, make sure to include a one or two sentence caption describing what is happening and/or list the names of individuals pictured from left-to-right, by row, etc.*)
- In what issue will the article appear? Will it be possible for me to get copies?

NOTE: As you write the article, you may have additional questions. Keep the line of communication between yourself and the publication open. It will serve everyone's best interest.

Editing and Revising Your Article

Writing an effective news or feature article will require careful editing and possibly several revisions on your part. Do not fear! This is standard procedure and will make your article better. Here is a checklist to help you revise and improve your work:

- Take a break from your article. After you've finished, set it aside and go do something else for a few hours. Then come back and read it with fresh eyes.
- Make sure you've applied basic journalism style guidelines from *The Associated Press Stylebook*. Please see the journalism style guidelines handout in this section.
- Make sure you have a strong headline and introduction to draw the reader into your story.
- Make sure each one of your paragraphs is coherent – one flowing into the other, each one focusing on a different idea. Most stories are a series of short paragraphs.
- Read the story aloud to yourself or someone else. Hearing your article will reveal its strengths and weaknesses. Fill in the gaps and answer any unanswered questions.
- Double and triple check your spelling, grammar and punctuation. Spell check is good, but you, your dictionary and the *Associate Press Stylebook* are better.

